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COUNTRY REPORT FOR BHUTAN

Herpetofauna of Bhutan: Present Status, Distribution and Conservation.

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Abstract

Bhutan's 46,600 sq km territory is largely mountainous, and the climate ranges from hot and humid in the south, to alpine in the north. Forest cover comprises 68 per cent of the land area and the little data available suggests a high herpetological species diversity, which is suspected to be threatened by land management practices, including shifting cultivation, overgrazing and burning. The ten protected areas do not include all major biomes, the montane forests being conspicuous in their absence. The Government's 1979 directive severely restricted the commercial felling of timber, which virtually limited all felling to activities undertaken by the Department of Forests. More field sampling is urged to better understand both the herpetofauna and their conservation problems.

Introduction

The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan lies between 88° 45' and 92° 10' E and 26° 40' and 28° 15' N in the eastern Himalayas. Its 46,600 sq km territory is largely mountainous, although the southern parts include the northern plains of the Brahmaputra River. Altitudinally, habitats range from 200 to over 7,500 m and the climate ranges from hot and humid in the south, to alpine in the north, Bhutan thus showing great ecological diversity unexpected for such a small country. Forest cover comprises 68 per cent of the land area (or 31 million ha), and forestry contributes a major role in the economy (16 per cent of the GDP in 1980-81).

Land management practices threaten the forests and wildlife of Bhutan. These include shifting cultivation, overgrazing and burning. Poaching of large game and intensive extraction of timber, used in the manufacture of traditional medicine and incense are other major threats to Bhutan's wildlife. Additionally, the ten protected areas set aside by the government (approximately 20 per cent of the country's total land area) do not include all major biomes, the montane forests being conspicuous in their absence. The National Forest Policy, prepared at the command of His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in 1985, states the value of Bhutan's forest and wildlife resources and the importance of conserving them.

The Government's 1979 directive severely restricted the commercial felling of timber, which virtually limited all felling to activities undertaken by the Department of Forests. Since Bhutan has a low human population density and a slow population growth (< 2 per cent per year), local consumption of fuelwood is low.

Little is known of Bhutan's herpetofauna, which has been reviewed by Bauer and Günther (1992). Information regarding the protected areas of the country and their conservation and management can be found in the works of Bunting (1989), Jackson (1981), Mahat (1985), Rao (1989), Sargent (1985), Sherpa (1994), Thinley (1989), UNDP/FAO (1986), and Wollenhaupt (1989). No amphibian or reptile species are protected in Schedule I of the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995, which lists 23 species of large birds and mammals and seven plant species.

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